

Painting Philosophically in 20th Century Vienna: A Comparison of Gustav Klimt and
Friedrich Nietzsche

Research Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with research
distinction in Germanic Languages and Literatures in the undergraduate colleges of The
Ohio State University

by

Erin Sankey

The Ohio State University

May 2017

Project Advisor: May Mergenthaler, Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures

Introduction

The controversy surrounding Gustav Klimt's University of Vienna Ceiling paintings gives insight into the struggle between tradition and modernism during the secessionist art movement at the turn of the 20th century. The painting also provides new insights in the relationship between art and philosophy at the time. Klimt's ceiling painting *Philosophy* of 1900 proved scandalous in its unconventional rendering of philosophy as a view of life rather than an academic discipline as expected by the University faculty who commissioned the painting. In this thesis, I will revisit the debates that surround the painting with the aim of reevaluating the way it depicts philosophy. Expanding on the positive evaluation of the piece at the time published by the Austrian playwright, director and critic Hermann Bahr and Professor of Art History Franz Wickhoff, I argue that we can discover new value in this painting as historically and artistically philosophical. This new value comes to the foreground through a juxtaposition of the painting with Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, published in 1891. The works of Klimt and Nietzsche have been compared before by scholars such as cultural historian Carl Schorske and art historian Lisa Florman. Lisa Florman focuses on the Apollonian and Dionysian contrast developed by Nietzsche in his *Birth of Tragedy* (1872) found in Klimt's *Beethoven Frieze* (1901). Carl Schorske relates Klimt's portrayal of the allegorical figure of *Wissen* in *Philosophy* to a description of knowledge as a

female personification from “Der Nachtwandler-Lied” of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

Viewing *Philosophy* through the lens of *Zarathustra*, but in a broader sense and with focus on the philosophical concepts of *Lebensphilosophie* contributes to the conversation circling the ceiling paintings, and upholds my claim that Klimt’s *Philosophy* does have philosophical worth as an aesthetic contribution to the 20th century.

Gustav Klimt was commissioned by the faculty of the University of Vienna in 1898 to construct three ceiling paintings for the Great Hall embodying the faculties of philosophy, medicine, and jurisprudence, while Franz Matsch was commissioned to create a fourth painting on the faculty of theology. All four paintings were supposed to exhibit the theme of light triumphing over darkness (Vergo 22). However, Klimt’s *Philosophy* did not meet the expectations of the commission. The professors on the commission anticipated an image similar to that of Raphael’s *School of Athens* (1501) in which the study of philosophy is portrayed by studious men engaged in discourse with one another. The image that Klimt submitted instead reflects on the experience of human life in the secessionist style that departs radically from that of the anticipated Italian fresco (Vergo 22). Upon its unveiling at the seventh exhibition of the Viennese Secession in March of 1900, Klimt’s first ceiling painting of *Philosophy* was met with scathing reviews and criticism both of the style and the content of the piece, which fueled a heated debate surrounding the role of his art (Fliedl 77). Professors of the University petitioned formally against the display of the painting in the Great Hall, citing as a reason its sheer ugliness, and criticizing both Klimt’s portrayal of philosophy as well as the philosophy they assumed the painting portrayed (Vergo 22).

The petition written by the University of Vienna faculty was met with a counter petition arguing for artistic freedom in support of Klimt's work. An outspoken defendant from the university was the professor of art history and philosophy at the University of Vienna, Franz Wickhoff. He presented a paper "What is Ugly?" in May of 1900 at the University of Vienna on a stringent historical approach to understanding of art in which he supported the ingenuity and innovation found in Klimt's *Philosophy*. Especially well known is Hermann Bahr's defense of Klimt. His speech "Rede über Klimt" and his essays prefacing the compilation of reviews entitled "Gegen Klimt" support the painting - aesthetically and as a philosophical work.

Building on Wickhoff and Bahr's support of Klimt, I present Klimt's deviation in style and in content as efforts to suggest a new interpretation of philosophy, especially with comparison to Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883). *Zarathustra* similarly pushes the boundaries of the expected medium and its ability to depict the practice of philosophy. Upon inspection of the controversy and the painting's role in the secessionist art movement in conjunction with analysis of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, it is evident that Klimt's *Philosophy* embodies philosophical themes of the *Lebensphilosophie* movement such as the experience of life itself being philosophical. Nietzsche, in a strategy similar to Klimt's, reimagines the form of a philosophical text in order to convey his ideas of *Lebensphilosophie*; the text is in the form of literature and does not contain a clear argumentative structure as opposed to the philosophical treatises of the past and present academic traditions. Through this, we can see parallels of themes such as time, suffering, and personal experience in the two works.

Contemporary views of Klimt identify his ceiling paintings as entirely “marginal,” both in the context of Klimt’s development and in relation to the discipline of art history as a whole (Bailey 14). Klimt’s style before 1897 is described by art historian Colin Bailey as “undefined”, and it seems as if the University paintings show some development into Klimt’s eventual style, yet still do not exemplify the best of Klimt’s work or his most innovative techniques (Bailey 14). The ceiling paintings are still criticized today for being allegorical and thus are not considered sufficiently modernist works of art, yet were criticized at the time for being too radical in their secessionist style; thus, one can understand how they represent a transition in Klimt’s body of work (Bailey 14). Because the themes expressed in *Philosophy* can be better understood in relation to Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*, I argue that *Philosophy* does have worth as a historical example of philosophy through analysis of the painting, a detailed exposition of the historical reception of the painting, and with a comparison to Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

Analysis

The three ceiling paintings that Gustav Klimt created for the University of Vienna’s Great Hall were not executed as the faculty expected. *Philosophy*, *Medicine*, and *Jurisprudence* strayed both in style and content from the values of the university. Klimt’s *Philosophy*, specifically, failed to capture the rigorous practice of philosophy as neo-kantianism, and instead portrayed a philosophy of life.

This understanding of philosophy can be seen through the composition of Gustav Klimt's painting titled as such. Measuring 430 cm by 300 cm (roughly 14 feet by 9 feet), the painting's sheer size emphasizes the massive void portrayed. Constructed for the ceiling of the University of Vienna's Great Hall in 1899 but later destroyed, one can only imagine how the painting would appear to loom hauntingly above the viewer due to its size and ghostly configuration. Because of its aforementioned destruction in 1945, only black and white photographs of the painting and sketches (including oil sketches) of the painting remain. Each painting for the commission was supposed to be representative of the faculties of the university, and was supposed to support a traditional theme of the Enlightenment's triumph over darkness. However, as one can see from *Philosophy* alone in its depiction of a night scene of the cosmos, this sense of reason and tradition is not present, and *Philosophy*, among the other paintings, seems to make quite a contradictory statement in its massive depiction of mangled nudes floating in a murky chasm.

There are three main groups of figures in *Philosophy*; the left space of the painting is consumed by a chain of 15 bodies, while the top center shows a woman with her eyes closed, and the bottom houses the face of a woman veiled by her hair. According to Klimt, we see "on the left a group of figures, the beginning of life, fruition, decay. On the right, the globe as mystery. Emerging below, a figure of light: knowledge" (Fliedl 77). The chain of nude bodies appears to be connected by a dark, swirling line, and it scales from top to bottom of the frame - at the top, the bodies of young children, and they appear to age as the chain progresses, with the dying at the bottom. These bodies appear to be involved in a series of interactions with one another, some displaying erotic love, others holding each other in what appears to be agony. Many hold their heads in their

hands, or have their bodies contorted inwards. Each figure in this group has closed eyes. The chain of these bodies seems to be infinite, as it is unclear whether or not it extends outside of the upper, bottom, or left edges of the painting, despite it beginning with birth and ending with death. Following news accounts on *Philosophy* from reviewers at the time, we can imagine that in the painting, these bodies were bluish- white in color (Bahr 45). The bottom of the painting's veiled goddess-like figure, with sweeping, dark hair which masks the lower half of her face, is *Wissen*, or knowledge. She is the only figure in the painting whose gaze connects with the viewer, to suggest an understanding. She is painted in gold (Bahr 59). In the upper middle of the painting, we see an almost translucent female form – she seems to be a part of the cosmos itself - whose body appears faintly and who represents “the image of the world and its enigma” and also appears reminiscent of the symbol of a sphinx (Stefano 46; Schorske 228). Lastly, there is an illuminated infant on the far right of the painting, separate from the other figures, and perhaps the possibility of several more ambiguous human forms at the bottom. These figures are painted against a night scene backdrop, which is painted in colors reminiscent of an “aquarium” – grey, blue, green with flecks of shimmering silver and gold (Bahr 59). One would assume that these bodies together seem to posit a personified interpretation of philosophy; it is evident through Klimt's choice of human experience as subject matter that this concept of life and its decay and fruition must play an important role in his understanding of philosophy.

Klimt uses a combination of brush strokes in this piece - the figures at the top left appear painted in a fluid and naturalistic way, perhaps reminiscent of the classical period, yet towards the bottom left of the painting, the figures depicted are painted with broader

lines which are increasingly detached and stray from a naturalistic account of textures associated with flesh. However, it seems as if *Wissen* and the woman who portrays the sphinx, the world as mystery, show a reverse of these formal elements - the figure in the top center looks to be veiled by loose, disconnected lines and streaks, while the figure in the bottom center is portrayed clearly and naturalistically. The brush style of the lower-left and top-center figures can also be seen in the background in Klimt's portrayal of the cosmos - the massive void is composed of tiny, streaking lines of dark and light which together form a shrouded chasm. This distinct transition between a clear, naturalistic representation and one which distorts exemplifies the theme of decay referenced by Klimt himself in his explanation of the painting, as the young appear in the naturalistic style while the older appear in the more marked, impressionistic style. Further, the sweeping, dark lines that connect each body on the left side of the painting elicit the same response. Despite the fluidity of these lines, they are marked and coarse, and entwine the bodies in an unpredictable pattern. This series of lines, in its dark, thick form, starkly contrasts the depiction of the pale, delicate bodies around which it circulates, demonstrating a distinction between the substances.

The faculty of the University of Vienna expected not this style associated with the Viennese secession, but rather had commissioned Klimt's works to fit with the Italian fresco style in which the rest of the hall was decorated. Although Klimt seems to borrow some ideas from the Renaissance tradition, his *Philosophy* in no way embodies the same mood as works depicting philosophy from this tradition, such as Raphael's *School of Athens* (1509). Raphael's iconic piece displays what was hoped of Klimt – groups of men engaged with one another in thoughtful debate, which compose a view of philosophy

as a study which is social, diligent, and scholarly. Klimt's *Philosophy* instead emphasizes the individual human life, and does not see philosophy as a practice but rather as experience. Klimt's figures seem to be engaged in philosophy simply through their human existence and reflection, supposing that human life itself is philosophical practice. Stylistically, the notion of space used by Klimt, in conjunct with the stacked positioning of bodies, is somewhat reminiscent of paintings from the Renaissance. The plane on which Klimt's figures lie does not seem three dimensional, in that there does not seem to be depth in space between the figures or between the figures and the void in which they lie, which shows an obvious tie to the early paintings in the tradition of Italian fresco. Yet still, this contradicts Raphael, whose use of linear perspective is used to create a rational architectural space in *School of Athens*. From this it is clear that Klimt's painting transforms the standards of the Renaissance style in order to paint *Philosophy*.

Klimt's *Philosophy* diverges from Raphael's *School of Athens* further in its portrayal of women and its appeal to allegory. *Philosophy* is often criticized for being a painting which is allegorical. Allegory is defined according to Paul De Man in *Blindness and Insight: Essays on the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* as "a sign that refers to one specific meaning and thus exhausts its suggestive potentialities once it has been deciphered" (De Man). According to art historian Glenn W. Most, this was a traditional medieval practice that was abandoned by Raphael:

"Before Raphael, artists depicted philosophy allegorically, in a tradition that ultimately goes back to a celebrated passage in *The Consolation of Philosophy* in which Dame Philosophy appears to Boethius as a majestic woman holding books and a scepter and wearing clothes embroidered with Greek letters and a staircase" (Most 146, 147)

This history of painting philosophy as a female allegory allows Klimt's *Philosophy* to depart even further from Raphael's masculine and rigid portrayal of the practice of philosophy. Klimt not only defies the guideline set by Raphael, but also seems to appeal to a convention which emphasizes the historical and the feminine, while simultaneously painting in a style which is too modern for his critics and the University faculty. Because allegory is reminiscent of the middle ages, which pre-dated rationalism and scientific convention and instead embraced the mystical and supernatural, Klimt's choice to paint in this style portrays philosophy itself as irrational and in contradiction to the neo-Kantian expectations of the University of Vienna and the methodology of Raphael. *School of Athens* shows a complex and thoughtful ordering of important male philosophers from both the Aristotelian (left side of the painting) and Platonic (right side of the painting) schools of thought; The chain of bodies in Klimt's *Philosophy* not only stresses ambiguity of identity but also portrays an order that is organic and whimsical, as if the figures are dancing to the rhythm of life, as opposed to being organized by intellectual contribution (Most 158).

With examination of *Philosophy* in relation to Klimt's paintings depicting the medicine and jurisprudence, we can better understand what thematically sets philosophy apart from the other faculties. The second painting in Klimt's University series, *Medicine*, although similar in rejecting enlightenment ideas, does not ask the same questions as *Philosophy*. *Medicine* depicts a similar array of bodies in contortion as that in *Philosophy*, again alongside a goddess, who appears to be that of Hygieia, the daughter of the god of medicine in Roman and in Greek mythology. Goddesses in both paintings have similarly dark, curly hair and gaze directly at the viewer (Marlow-Storkovich).

According to Carl Schorske, Hygeia represents the “ambiguity” of our biology, in contra to the “prevention and cure” notions that were expected of Klimt’s work (Schorske 240). *Medicine*, like *Philosophy*, portrays a seeming cycle of life, yet one which seems to be more physically descriptive than that of *Philosophy*. In contra to the poses of figures in *Philosophy* with their heads in their hands, seemingly in some kind of emotional or intellectual peril, the figures in *Medicine* are obviously stricken with physical transpirings - *Medicine* not only alludes to birth and death, as *Philosophy* does, but actually portrays both skeletal and pregnant figures, suggesting an end and beginning to the physicality of man that is not presented in the ambiguous interpretation of the psyche in *Philosophy*. Moreover, *Medicine* shows many of the faces of those in the chain, unlike *Philosophy*, and these faces do not necessarily exhibit emotion, leading the viewer to further believe that the piece is not meant to emphasize mental or emotional states but rather physical processes. Although philosophical in its examination of the physical boundaries of man, *Medicine* does not elicit the same concerns regarding human consciousness as *Philosophy*, which seems to foreground emotional or mental suffering and questions regarding purpose of existence.

Klimt’s third ceiling painting, *Jurisprudence*, although departing stylistically from the conglomeration of nude, pained bodies found in *Philosophy* and *Medicine*, continues the theme of earthly torture in that it presents an interpretation of the law that focuses not on justice, but on punishment. In *Jurisprudence* we see a distinct comparison between the ideal and the reality of justice; in the upper plane of the image we see what represents three judges in an organized, geometric system, and in the lower plane, we see a disfigured reflection of this - a male prisoner faces punishment from three contorted and

sinister judges in a dark, twisting realm (Schorske 251). Through looking at the three paintings together, it is evident that each one provides a controversial departure from the conservative, historical notions of philosophy, medicine, and jurisprudence that was expected from Klimt, which is emphasized through the utilization of the secessionist style. It is clear therefore that Klimt's paintings seek to reinvent the interpretations of these faculties.

Historical Reception of *Philosophy*

Austrian playwright and writer Hermann Bahr compiled a book of reviews entitled *Gegen Klimt* that includes criticism of Klimt's work written in the years 1900-1902, during the ceiling painting controversy. *Gegen Klimt* appears alongside a speech of Bahr's titled "Rede über Klimt" from 1901 and an essay titled "Klimt's Triumph" in Bahr's *Kritische Schriften VIII*, to be described below. Bahr frames the hostility towards Klimt's works as an example of Vienna's problematic narrow-mindedness as a whole at the turn of the 20th century, and through his support of Klimt, Bahr calls for creative freedom and for a diversity of culture in Austria. The book, *Gegen Klimt*, is divided into sections about several paintings including the ceiling paintings, *Philosophy*, *Medicine*, *Jurisprudence*, while also including *Goldfische* and *Fries*. The newspaper articles collected in *Gegen Klimt* on *Philosophy* include reviews, criticism, the petition to remove the painting started by University of Vienna faculty, a counter-petition, and responses to this petition.

Klimt's painting *Philosophy* was met with negative reviews after its presentation at the seventh Viennese secession exhibition of 1900, expressing criticism of the philosophy depicted, the style of the painting, and its general aesthetic appearance (Fliedl 77). The reviews formulate 3 points of critique – first, the piece was seen as unintentional parody of misguided contemporary philosophy (in particular, Schopenhauer); secondly, the painting was done in a secessionist style that was seen as unfit for the University of Vienna's ceilings; thirdly, professors in their petition to have the painting removed claimed the painting was simply ugly. The reviews encompass some or all of these ideas simultaneously. Only one of the articles was positive, in that it provided a detailed summary of Franz Wickhoff's discussion of art history in support of Klimt's *Philosophy* as objectively beautiful.

The first criticism mentioned, which focuses on what the painting depicted – philosophy - seems to enrage many of the reviewers for several reasons. According to the author writing for *Plein-Air* published on March 12, 1900, the philosophy represented is not true philosophy, because it does not represent the scientific and exact methods of philosophy, and it portrays it as nothing more than a mystic and unsolvable mystery (43-44). Echoes of this thought occur in other reviews as well; another reviewer writes “es ist klar: dieses Fräulein schämt und ärgert sich, daß es Schopenhauer gelesen hat” (42). The use of the diminutive “Fräulein” here instead of “Frau” indicates misogyny in an attempt to mock Klimt's representation of philosophy as human life. The painting is described as a “schlechten Witz” or “bad joke” by the publication *Vaterland*, and is referred to as a parody in several others (Bahr 41, 43, 46, 58). These statements seem not only to mock

the painting's portrayal of philosophy, but appear to criticize the philosophy the reviewers understand Klimt's painting to be about.

Further, several authors worry that Klimt's *Philosophy* is purely "allegorisch dargestellt", and thus cannot have significance in itself or express artistic consciousness (42). In a review from the *Neue Freie Presse*, Professor Franz Exner from the University of Vienna elaborates that the sort of symbolic representation encompassed by allegory is not understood by the faculty as art (54). He argues that if the figures of a painting are pre-existing signifiers of a larger concept, then the painting itself does not represent something, rather it relies on pre-existing images to convey the concept of philosophy. This can be understood with appeal to the definition of allegory presented by De Man, in that allegory "appears as dryly rational and dogmatic in its reference to a meaning that it does not itself constitute"; when using an allegorical image, the image "runs its full course" when the "meaning is reached" (De Man 188, 189). The painting thus becomes a sign rather an artwork if it is allegorical, and loses significance as a painting – there is no further room for interpretation. In contrast, the faculty of the University seem to have envisioned a painting that was more representative of philosophy, such as Raphael's *The School of Athens*, which depicts philosophers engaging in philosophical activities, and does not include allegorical figures and is instead painted in a naturalistic style. Klimt's *Philosophy* therein references traditions which predate and conflict with the norms of the Renaissance, in that allegorical painting was commonly used in the middle ages. Here it is evident that the use of allegory is criticized for entailing bad painting and for referencing a tradition which would have seemed backwards or regressive to the University faculty.

Secondly, Klimt's *Philosophy* was criticized for failing to match the appropriate style of the University of Vienna's Great Hall, as well as the known tradition of ceiling paintings. The style of the Great Hall embodied the aesthetic values and intellectual values of the Italian Renaissance – built in 1884 and designed by Heinrich von Ferstel, the building was architecturally demonstrative of the “Verbindung von Universität und [der katholischen] Kirche” and the design of the building was heavily reliant on examples of Renaissance architecture (Posch). The faculty expected Klimt to create his ceiling paintings in coherence with that context. Italian frescoes of the Renaissance period were traditionally expected to grace the ceilings of such a prestigious building, yet Klimt produced nothing of the sort – his painting *Philosophy* was in the popular secessionist “Jugendstil” or Art Nouveau style, which to many did not seem fitting for an academic building, and which explicitly defied the expectations of the community who had commissioned a historically conservative piece (58). As referenced above, Klimt's alleged use of symbol and allegory refer instead to the medieval period, which further drive the painting to contradict values of rationality and Greek tradition favored by the University of Vienna.

Lastly, the painting was criticized for being ugly. The faculty at the University of Vienna petitioned to have the painting rejected for the sake of it being an eyesore - professors claimed that they did not want to disrespect the modern art movement, Jugendstil, or artistic freedom, but simply thought the painting was too ugly to belong in the Great Hall (53, 54). This petition exhibits a carefully structured, bureaucratic language which seeks to both reject Klimt's *Philosophy* while refraining from offending any party involved. Despite criticism regarding *Philosophy*, the majority of reviews

acknowledge Klimt's talent as an artist (43). They appear to believe that the concept of philosophy does not lend itself to visual representation.

The article which presents a positive opinion on Klimt's painting *Philosophy* is an excerpt from a talk on the concept of beauty given by Professor Franz Wickhoff of the philosophy department of the University of Vienna. In his discussion, Wickhoff explains how what humans consider beautiful has changed over time, and that the current definition is one which embraces Klimt's paintings. Wickhoff argues that the painting was in fact not ugly, and that Klimt's art should be praised and appreciated as opposed to rejected (63). According to Wickhoff, what was beautiful in the past was what was seen as natural and evolutionarily beneficial, but now what is beautiful is the manifestation of creativity. Creative expression thus allows for the changing of art and the accommodation of new artistic styles and movements (62). Thus, according to Wickhoff it is atavistic to claim that one artistic movement is more beautiful than another. The beauty of art lies in its ability to change. This addresses the previous complaints some critics held about *Philosophy* being in a secessionist style and not that of the Italian Renaissance (63). Wickhoff further deplores the commonly held notion that art should be understood, and argues that beauty should not be based on understanding. He asserts that like Klimt's paintings, there are works by Michelangelo, which are considered beautiful but are not understandable. Finally, Wickhoff does not deny that the painting is allegorical, but he simultaneously does not see this as ruining the painting's significance, in that *Philosophy* uses color and mood to show the ideas as well, and that these formal aspects help shape the content of the painting and provide creativity and ingenuity.

Whereas Wickhoff addresses the stylistic complaints found in the reviews, Bahr defends Klimt's ability to paint the concept philosophy. As the leading spokesperson of the secessionist movement, Hermann Bahr defends Klimt's artistic work and talent in his speech "Rede über Klimt" given on March 24, 1901, and in his essay "Klimt's Triumph" published in the *Österreichische Volks-Zeitung* in 1901 (Collins, Bahr). In "Rede über Klimt", Bahr stresses that the reviews against Klimt's ceiling paintings exemplify a dangerous narrowness in Austrian thought, and Bahr expresses a need for artistic freedom in Austrian culture. Bahr emphatically states "sie irren: die Kunst hat nicht den Gefühlen Ihrer Majorität zu entsprechen" in response to the claims from the Ministry of Education of the University of Vienna that Klimt's ceiling paintings were in opposition to the majority's aesthetic feelings (Bahr 13, 14). To Bahr, art does is concerned with the majority's opinion, rather should have some exceptional quality. Bahr ends his speech with a call to action, wherein he demands the artistic freedom be upheld and supported:

"Ich habe die Meinung, dass, wenn es die Freiheit der Kunst und den Schutz der Künstler gilt, jeder einzelne Mann die Pflicht hat, aufzustehen und sich zu melden. Diese habe ich erfüllt. Nun ist es an Ihnen." (17)

Bahr specifically mentions the ceiling painting controversy as it pertains to *Philosophy* and its aesthetic value in "Klimt's Triumph" – it is here that we find a strong defense of Klimt's ability as a painter as well as his ability to depict philosophy. Bahr first characterizes Klimt's body of work as idealistic and expressing subjectivity, specifically in his landscapes. Through choosing two noncontroversial examples of Klimt's paintings, "Am Attersee" and "Junge Birken", Bahr explains that there is something special and unusual about Klimt's paintings that allow the landscapes to

express more than nature (Bahr 19). Bahr states: “Klimt hat nun aber die Kraft, indem er solche Werke gibt, sie so darzustellen, dass sie zugleich wie Gleichnisse oder Abbilder eines seelischen Zustandes auf uns wirken” and, in the example of Klimt painting a *Rosenstrauch*, that Klimt “stellt in ihr eine Idee dar. Diese Idee ist ebenso in der inneren Welt vorhanden; es gibt in der Seele etwas, das Rosenstrauch ist”(19). In this sense, Bahr claims that Klimt has an ability to represent the essences of the subject in his paintings, in a way that seems reliant on a platonic understanding of the world. Klimt’s painting has an ability to express the subjective, individual perspective in a way that is universal and objectively observable (21).

This explanation relates to the controversy of the ceiling paintings; Bahr suggests that Klimt is asked to do the opposite in the case of *Philosophy*, in that Klimt must take a broad concept and represent it specifically. For Bahr this introduces the danger of allegorical painting. According to Goethe, allegory differs from symbolism in that a symbol is an object which embodies the concept it represents in a way that is necessary, whereas allegory is a contingent relationship (De Man 189). The fictionality of an allegory suggests that the allegorical object does not directly embody the concept it portrays, and is instead reliant on a historical tradition of the allegorical figure to posit a relation to the concept, which illustrates its contingency. In terms of painting, this poses a danger in that the artist is not painting the concept itself, but is rather painting a fictional figure which is used to signify the said concept.

This is where the danger of allegory becomes a threat. Bahr acknowledges this danger along with many critics of *Philosophy*, but he does not think that *Philosophy* falls victim to it (21). However forceful Bahr’s argument for Klimt’s *Philosophy* is, Bahr’s

own explanation of what exactly allows *Philosophy* to succeed is not especially detailed or philosophically rigorous. In order to refute the claims of allegorical painting, Bahr explains that Klimt thinks in faces and visions (19, 21). This statement expresses that Klimt's use of figure and body is an expression in itself. Thus, they are not reducible simply to allegory, and instead instantiate new ideas on their own. From this, Klimt's figures seem to expose the ideas of the human condition in themselves, in that they are manifestations of Klimt's own ideas and feelings.

The concept that Klimt thinks in visions and faces aligns with the concerns of the *Lebensphilosophie* movement: an important facet of the German philosophical movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was the idea that "life can only be understood from within" (Gaiger). This focus on the internal feelings and individual experience was a reaction to the efforts of Immanuel Kant and rationalists to comprehend reality in an abstract and scientific way (Wolin). Bahr's interpretation of Klimt as possessing the ability to isolate the *innere Welt* within the subject of his painting and express it in a way that is universal and outside of the individual provides Klimt with a unique ability to express the intimate truths of human life without appealing to "bloodless Kantian abstractions or scientific reductions" ("Lebensphilosophie"). Understanding Klimt as Bahr does, *Philosophy* seems to use the medium of painting to connect the isolated individual experience as examined by *Lebensphilosophie* to the outside world in a way that the written tradition of philosophy cannot. With this understanding of *Philosophy*, it is possible to consider Klimt's work as philosophical in a historical or contemporaneous sense, in that it expresses the ideas of the *Lebensphilosophie* movement in a way unique to the medium of painting.

A New Interpretation of Philosophy

Klimt's *Philosophy* contradicts the philosophy anticipated by the University of Vienna faculty and professors, and posits a philosophy which is best understood relative to the *Lebensphilosophie* movement beginning in Germany at the turn of the 19th Century (Lebovic 26). *Lebensphilosophie* was founded as “a protest in the name of life against modern science and universalism” and sought to replace a philosophy of truth-seeking with one with roots instead in “feeling and intuition” (Gaiger). The movement thus stresses that “life can only be understood from within” and thereby distinguishes itself from the romantic thinkers who argued one could reflect the human condition onto nature, and further differentiates its understanding of philosophy from rationalism, Kantianism, and other schools of thought which encouraged an objective and “empiricist culture” (Gaiger). From this, one can gather that *Lebensphilosophie* concerns itself with the individual human experience, and “living life from the inside”, and not the universal or objective (“Lebensphilosophie”). Friedrich Nietzsche contributed greatly to the movement, and I will analyze his novel *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in comparison to *Philosophy* in order to extrapolate the philosophical themes of Klimt's work. Although there is no direct evidence that Klimt read Nietzsche, it was known that Klimt and Nietzsche “ran in the same circles”, and I will show how the two works express similar themes and thus reflect philosophical ideas permeating Viennese culture as a whole during the turn of the 20th Century (Schorske 228).

In the article "Gustav Klimt and the Precedent of Ancient Greece", Lisa Florman explores the connection between Klimt and Nietzsche in the distinction between Apollonian and Dionysian through a careful analysis of Klimt's later work, *The Beethoven Frieze* (1901) and Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). Florman argues that Klimt's portrayal of Greek icons and mythological symbols aligns with that of Nietzsche's characterization of ancient Greece, "demanding a revision of antiquity" (Florman 314). Klimt's painting of Archaic Grecian motifs instead of the "more restrained" motifs of the Classical tradition suggest that Klimt's *Beethoven Frieze* can be understood as a "painterly equal" to Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* (Florman 311). Although these works differ from those which I discuss, Florman's claims of similarities in thought between Klimt and Nietzsche give inclination to believe that the two shared ideology and thematic expression.

Carl Schorske briefly contextualizes Klimt's *Philosophy* through a comparison to Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in order to understand Klimt's goddess *Wissen*. Schorske draws a parallel between Klimt's veiled goddess and Nietzsche's characterization of *Wissen* in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. A quote from *Zarathustra* characterizes *Wissen* as such:

"Oh yes, Wisdom! One thirsts after her and is never satisfied; one looks through veils, grabs through nets. Is she beautiful? How should I know? But even the oldest carps are baited with her. She is changeable and stubborn; often I have seen her bite her lip and comb her hair against the grain. Perhaps she is evil and false and a female in every way; but just when she speaks ill of herself is she seductive?" (109)

This personification of wisdom connects with Klimt's representation of the goddess as veiled mysteriously behind long, wild hair, and shows a similarity in how

Nietzsche and Klimt understand the concept of knowledge as something seductive, yet impossible to attain. Thus, this connection sets forth grounds to further inspect the relationship between the two works, and helps the viewer better understand what sort of philosophy Klimt paints. Therefore, I use the Nietzschean text as a means to better understand in more detail the philosophical themes of 20th century Vienna as a comparison to those expressed by Klimt in order to prove that the painting can be seen itself as a philosophical artifact of its time. Both Klimt and Nietzsche provide a striking protest against rationalism in the expected form and content of their work; I have addressed Klimt's secessionist style and departure from the style of the Italian fresco above in conjunction with the criticism of allegory and the depiction not of the practice of philosophy, but rather of what Klimt envisions philosophy to be with respect to *The School of Athens*. Now I will explain how Nietzsche similarly defies the expectations of a philosophical work through form and content in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* is not the typical philosophical work. The text is laid out as a novel as opposed to a non-fiction essay. Instead of containing a well-structured argument, the text consists of the teachings of mystical Zarathustra and includes songs and short stories, which embody the *Lebensphilosophie* themes, which Nietzsche develops, such as life as struggle, eternal recurrence, and the concept of the *Übermensch*. This playful style is in stark contrast to the philosophical texts written by rationalists at the time, such as Hermann Cohen of the Neo-Kantian movement. Because the medium of literature chosen by Nietzsche is more approachable, this formal choice in itself plays a significant role in the philosophy Nietzsche creates. The structure of Nietzsche's work

thereby reimagines philosophy as not a rigorous academic pursuit in search of an objective truth, but rather as a question of human life, one which arguably could not be presented in the form of a clear philosophical argument. Further, the medium's accessibility as a novel represents a philosophy that is for the common people and not only scholars. An example can be seen in "das Nachtwandler-Lied" of the text, wherein Zarathustra teaches others the following song:

"O man, take care!
 What does the deep midnight declare?
 "I was asleep—
 From a deep dream I woke and swear:—
 The world is deep,
 Deeper than day had been aware.
 Deep is its woe—
 Joy—deeper yet than agony:
 Woe implores: Go!
 But all joy wants eternity—
 Wants deep, wants deep eternity." (Nietzsche 400)

This song explains a tension between joy and suffering and emphasizes the extent to which the world cannot be fully understood by reason. Through the comparison of life as a "deep dream" or "deep midnight", life is supposed as something that is dark, unclear, and irrational, and as something which has the ability to simultaneously be peaceful as well as frightful. The song expresses the "deep woe" in conjunction with joy – and proves a tension between the two, both of which are tenants of human life. The feelings of joy and woe impact other decisions and desires, such as that of eternity and fleetingness – woe seems to evoke a desire for release, while joy implores the opposite. Yet both, according to Nietzsche, are necessary facets of human life. This paradox between joy and woe, and between eternity and end seems therefore integral to life.

This example illustrates the way in which Nietzsche introduces a theme, such as that of will and suffering, in a way which is clearly not a straightforward argument, and rather uses the art form of poetry to develop itself. Continually, the fact that Zarathustra uses song as a means to teach his followers about philosophy in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* seems to evoke the notion that philosophy is better understood in this way rather than that of elaborate argumentation. In the chapter “On Scholars” of the translated text, Zarathustra exclaims that “I am not, like [the scholars], trained to pursue knowledge as if it were nut cracking. I love freedom and the air over the fresh earth” (Nietzsche 125). Nietzsche’s comparison of scholarly philosophy to “nut-cracking” supposes that it is strenuous, mechanical work akin to that of riddle solving – when one cracks a nut, the goal is to retrieve the nut and eat it, after which there is nothing left to do but find another nut to crack. The love of “freedom and air over the fresh earth” supposes something quite different – air is not something which can be captured and understood like a riddle through logic. It is instead an unpredictable force, seemingly impossible to seize or attain. The comparison between “nut cracking” and “air over fresh earth” is quite stark; the nut cracking supposes a minutia, or a facet of human activity, whereas the air over fresh earth is indicative of something much broader, and essential to life itself. This quote from Zarathustra suggests that philosophy concerns itself not simply with the rational, mechanical pursuit of knowledge but also with the irrational and unpredictable forces such as freedom that govern life itself. This statement mimics the theme of the division between the apollonian and the dionysian aspects of humanity, and in describing a philosophy which should not only encompass “nut cracking” but should also encompass

“the air over fresh earth”, he envisions philosophy in a way akin to Klimt’s representation – as something concerned with life itself as opposed to the search for truth.

Klimt’s *Philosophy* mimics this shift – in order to paint the philosophy he envisions, he must defy the constraints of the University of Vienna’s commission and paint in a secessionist style rather than that of the Italian Renaissance. Further, Klimt’s use of symbol confronts the rationalist’s approach to philosophy because it regenerates a tradition which predates the Renaissance and Enlightenment modes of thinking and instead suggests a time “of ignorance and superstition over rational activity” (Lindberg). Schorske mentions that Klimt’s *Wissen* was originally to be painted “in the traditional manner of a seated female profile, bowed in thought like Rodin’s thinker”, but that Klimt changed his portrayal to that of a “Nietzschean midnight singer rising in challenging frontality”, in reference to *Zarathustra*’s description of *Wissen*, in 1899 (Schorske 231). This piece of information shows an intentional revision on Klimt’s behalf to change the painting from embodying a more traditional, rationalistic approach to philosophy to one which was more irrational. The choice to use radical stylistic deviations when asked to paint a traditional ceiling painting of philosophy amounts not only to an artistic statement, but also to a philosophical protest that aligns with Nietzsche’s departure from norms in *Zarathustra*. This rebellion against rationalism through form emphasizes a shift in values circulating through Viennese thought at the time, in that Klimt intentionally chooses to depart from the historically conservative form of painting philosophy in order to paint philosophy in a manner which is controversial both in form and in content.

A close look at Klimt’s group of bodies in *Philosophy* within the context of *Lebensphilosophie* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* gives the viewer an enhanced

understanding of the painting and its portrayal of the human condition. The majority of figures, excluding the pair of lovers, with their heads in their hands, appear to be isolated and in suffering. The isolation of each individual seems to parallel with the importance of individual experience to the *Lebensphilosophie* movement; it is clear that these figures are not looking outward, but rather have eyes closed or bodies contorted inward towards the figure's own body. In this sense, the people are concerned with internal struggle and perception as opposed to looking outward for understanding. Supposing that the individuals are depicted as engaged in philosophy, the viewer can understand that philosophy is deeply intertwined with this introspection and experience of suffering – thus, to practice philosophy is to experience life. Continually, these contorted figures in conjunction with the pair of lovers also stress the importance of physical experience and physical suffering. Nietzsche's chapter "das Nachtwandler-Lied" meditates on the theme that one cannot have eternal joy without suffering, and this theme is referenced earlier in the novel as well. A translation of the text states "creation... is the great redemption from suffering" and that "suffering is needed and much change... to be the child who is newly born, the creator must also want to be the mother who gives birth and the pangs of the birth giver" (87). This quote seems to be reflective of the diversity of figures Klimt depicts, all engaged in an individual struggle, yet united in that this struggle is somehow necessary to human experience and life itself.

A second theme that can be explored both in Klimt's *Philosophy* and Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is time and the role time plays in the human experience. In *Philosophy*, a thick, unified brush stroke seems to unite the web of bodies, which are ordered by age – the youngest and children at the top, and the older and elderly towards

the bottom. One could argue that this unifying brush stroke could signify time as a connection between the stages of life each figure is experiencing. However, this brush stroke is winding and circular, clearly not indicative of a linear relationship, and seems to connect the bodies in an irregular pattern. Further, the bodies themselves seem to be caged within these sweeping lines, as if they bind them together and keep them in place. In *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche develops his theory of eternal recurrence: “all truth is crooked, time itself is a circle” (Nietzsche 158). Eternal recurrence describes a spiraling topography of time wherein events will recur infinitely, and that everything which will happen has happened already. We can see this in Klimt’s bodies, ordered by age, which are pushed to the very limit of the canvas, yet brought back in by the coarse lines which encircle them in a continuous loop. This description of time as non linear and instead as cyclical gives the viewer a nuanced view of the figures in Klimt’s *Philosophy* – perhaps these figures themselves are bound by a cycle of repetitive suffering, trapped in their pattern of birth and decay. Whether or not Klimt’s expression of humanity represents precisely Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence, the re-imagination of time as non-linear and its reflection in *Philosophy* allows the viewer to further contemplate and explore the significance of *Philosophy* as a philosophical work.

Although I claim *Philosophy* to be a historical example of a philosophical work, through analysis of Keith Lehrer’s theory of painting philosophically, one could interpret *Philosophy* to be a current philosophical work as well. Lehrer distinguishes in his paper “Representation in Painting and Consciousness” between what a painting depicts pictorially and what the painting itself represents. What the painting represents seems dependent on how the painting is stylistically created, whereas the pictorial depiction is

reliant on what is being painted. He uses the example of a model – just because a painting is of a model, the painting is not necessarily about the model itself. Lehrer further explains how it is represented and that the perception of the painting itself is necessary for interpretation: “the ... painting of the mountain... gives [the viewer] a representation of the mountain in the particular manner in which the painting is experienced” (Lehrer 4). He further explains this in terms of a paradox: “on one hand, the content of the painting is particular. On the other hand, the content of the painting is something you perceive” (4). This becomes paradoxical in that the particular aspect of the painting is objective, while its perception is subjective. In the context of *Philosophy*, one can connect Lehrer’s explanation of representation to Bahr’s praise of Klimt in his essay “Klimt’s Triumph” – according to Bahr, Klimt has the ability to represent objects such that they connect to an idea the viewer has in his or her soul in an objective manner. In this sense, Klimt’s work seems to accommodate both premises of the paradox, in that it objectively denotes the subject matter while also connecting to the subjective experience of the viewer. Lehrer takes the importance of the viewer’s experience a step further by expressing that the perceived content is something ineffable (5). If it is the case that the meaning found in the experience of viewing a painting is unique to the medium of painting and cannot be expressed otherwise, then it is a possibility that painting has the ability to express philosophical truths which cannot be expressed otherwise. In this sense, Klimt’s *Philosophy* could indeed be seen as a unique philosophical work, which despite comparisons to literary work such as *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, contains in itself a philosophy which is dependent on its formal qualities as a piece of visual art.

This ineffability has the potential to interact in a meaningful way with Klimt's use of allegory. Because Klimt explicitly calls his goddess *Wissen* yet does not stylistically reference the traditional allegorical figure of Dame Philosophy, and instead paints his own new goddess but with the same name as the traditional figure, he uses allegory to turn against itself. Instead of using allegory to instantiate the same "exhausted" interpretation of philosophy, he uses allegory to suggest both a past tradition of philosophy and a modern rendition of philosophy. *Wissen*, as Klimt paints her, is unclothed, with unruly, long hair, and a piercing gaze – a major departure from the cloaked, scepter-bearing Dame Philosophy from the middle ages. This intentional failure embraces the subjectivity of *Wissen*, and thus in this break emphasizes that which is non-rational. Klimt thus reconciles the perceived disconnect between allegory and ineffability in the double sided nature of his goddess *Wissen*, in a way which is not transcendental. Klimt does not rise above the practice of allegory, rather uses the tradition against itself – this can be related to the concept of living life for life's sake stressed *Lebensphilosophie*. Neither appeals to a higher power or idea, rather both seek subjectivity in the pre-existing system.

Not only does this approach support Klimt's controversial painting *Philosophy* as having value both as an artwork and as a philosophical work, but this approach also forces one to broaden his or her conceptions of what a philosophical work is. We can view *Philosophy* as depicting philosophy in three different ways simultaneously. First, we can interpret the allegorical figure of *Wissen* as portraying philosophy in a way which intentionally uses allegory against itself. Because Klimt utilizes the convention of allegory in a way which allows for new meaning to be discovered in the pre-existing sign

of *Wissen*, he is able to call upon tradition in a reimagined way. A second way the painting construes philosophy is through the depiction of human life; by understanding the group of tangled bodies as living and experiencing in the unpredictable ebb and flow of existence, philosophy can thus be defined as such. Lastly, we can understand the figures as engaging in the practice of philosophy through introspection and human experience. As demonstrated with the ceiling painting controversy in 1900 Vienna, the notions of what one deems to fit the categories of art and philosophy are constantly challenged.

Bibliography

1. Fin de Siecle Vienna

Karnes, Kevin C. "Wagner, Klimt, and the Metaphysics of Creativity in *Fin-De-Siècle* Vienna." *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, vol. 62, no. 3, 2009, pp. 647–697., www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/jams.2009.62.3.647.

Posch, Herbert. "Das Hauptgebäude Der Universität Wien an Der Ringstraße." *650 plus*. Universität Wien, 31 Mar. 2017. Web. 01 May 2017.

Schorske, Carl E. *Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture*. New York: Knopf, 1979. Print.

2. Klimt

Bailey, Colin B. *Gustav Klimt: Modernism in the Making*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001. Print.

Bahr, Hermann. *Kritische Schriften VIII*. Weimar: n.p., 2009. Print.

Fliedl, Gottfried. *Gustav Klimt 1862 – 1918: The World in Female Form*, p. 77, Benedikt Taschen, 1944

Foster, Hal. *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004. Print.

Lachnit, Edwin. "Neuentdeckte Dokumente Zum Professorenstreit Um Klimts "philosophie"." *Wiener Jahrbuch Für Kunstgeschichte / Hrsg. Vom Bundesdenkmalamt Wien Und Vom Institut Für Kunstgeschichte Der Universität Wien*. (1986): 205-220. Print.

Marlowe-Storkovich, Tina. "Medicine by Gustav Klimt." *Artibus Et Historiae / Istituto Internazionale Per Le Ricerche Di Storia Dell'arte (irsa)*. (2003): 231-252. Print.

Stefano, Eva Di, Gustav Klimt, and Stephen Jackson. *Gustav Klimt: Art Nouveau Visionary*. New York: Sterling Pub., 2008. Print.

3. Nietzsche, Nietzsche's Reception, Lebensphilosophie

Del Caro, Adrian. "Hofmannsthal as a Paradigm of Nietzschean Influence on the Austrian 'Fin De Siècle.'" *Modern Austrian Literature*, vol. 22, no. 3/4, 1989, pp. 81–95., www.jstor.org/stable/24647845.

Gaiger, Jason (1998). "Lebensphilosophie". In Craig, Edward. [Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy](http://www.routledge.com/Philosophy). Routledge.

"Lebensphilosophie." . : , 2008-01-01. [Oxford Reference](http://www.oxfordreference.com). 2008-01-01. Date Accessed 1 May. 2017
<<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100056739>>.

Lebovic, Nitzan. "The Beauty and Terror of 'Lebensphilosophie': Ludwig Klages, Walter Benjamin, and Alfred Baeumler." *South Central Review*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2006, pp. 23–39., www.jstor.org/stable/40039911.

Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, Thomas Common, and Elisabeth FÄ¶rster-Nietzsche. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. New York: Modern Library, 1917. Print.

Wolin, Richard. "Continental Philosophy." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 13 Mar. 2008. Web. 01 May 2017.

4. Nietzsche and Klimt/ Nietzsche and Art

Florman, Lisa. "Gustav Klimt and the Precedent of Ancient Greece." *The Art Bulletin* 72.2 (1990): 310. *ProQuest*. Web. 6 July 2016.

Kemal, Salim, Ivan Gaskell, and Daniel W. Conway. *Nietzsche, Philosophy and the Arts*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998. Print.

Rampléy, Matthew. *Nietzsche, Aesthetics and Modernism*. N.p.: Cambridge UP, 2000. Print.

Schorske, Carl E. *Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture*. New York: Knopf, 1979. Print. (Specify page numbers)

5. Philosophy and Art (Visual Art)

De Man, Paul. *BLINDNESS AND INSIGHT: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. Place of Publication Not Identified: TAYLOR & FRANCIS, 2016. Print

Lehrer, Keith. "Keith Lehrer, Representation in Painting and in Consciousness - PhilPapers." *Keith Lehrer, Representation in Painting and in Consciousness - PhilPapers*. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 Feb. 2017.

Lindberg, David C. (2003). "The Medieval Church Encounters the Classical Tradition: Saint Augustine, Roger Bacon, and the Handmaiden Metaphor". In Lindberg, David C. and Numbers, Ronald L. *When Science & Christianity Meet*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. ISBN 0-226-48214-6.

Melville, Stephen W., and Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe. *Seams: Art as a Philosophical Context*. Amsterdam: G B Arts, 1996. Print.

6. Paintings of philosophy

"A HISTORY." *Theviennasecession.com*. N.p., 27 May 2016. Web. 14 Dec. 2016. <<http://www.theviennasecession.com/vienna-secession/>>.

Foster, Hal. *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004. Print.

Most, Glenn W. "Reading Raphael: 'The School of Athens' and Its Pre-Text." *Critical Inquiry* 23.1 (1996): 145-82. Web.

7. Artistic movements around 1900; materiality in painting, ornamentality, Jugendstil and Secession

Schorske, Carl E. *Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture*. New York: Knopf, 1979. Print.